

“Night Walks”

Grace Miller

Sullivan Hunt arrives in London on a Tuesday. It is late when she gets to her flat, and it is empty, save for a bed frame left behind by the last tenant and a kettle in the kitchen. She has brought only one suitcase and her backpack—her books were the only thing she left behind. There was no room for sentimentality when there was nothing to be sentimental about. Everything is behind her. This flat is all that matters now; this city; this version of herself.

There are two packages by the door. She drags the larger box, which contains her mattress, into her bedroom with her entire weight. She cuts the box open with her keys and pulls the rolled-up mattress out and onto the bed. She slowly returns to the entryway and grabs the smaller package, locking the door before heading back to her room and unfurling her new duvet. The mattress and the duvet are the only two things she had thought to order, and she kicks herself for forgetting to buy sheets. She grits her teeth and closes her eyes, taking a deep breath before sitting down on the bare bed, mattress still limp after being unrolled. She sits for a moment with her eyes closed, fists pressed up against her forehead and elbows resting on her thighs.

She thinks about who she is, and who she wants to be, but mostly she thinks about who she was. The girl who, a month ago, was sitting in a different apartment in a different city, breaking up with her boyfriend who she couldn't love, getting rid of all of her furniture and clothing and dropping them off at the local thrift store without thinking twice. She didn't say goodbye, or warn anyone that she was moving across the Atlantic Ocean to a place she'd never even visited before. Her old boyfriend didn't have the right to ask, her parents didn't care enough to ask, and all the friends she'd made and lost over the years would never think to ask. She didn't tell anyone she was leaving because there was nobody to tell. She quit her job, booked a ticket, and now here she is, cautious and hopeful, lying in bed in her empty flat, and scared of messing it up. This is her new start—this city that doesn't know her, full of people who haven't yet found out who she is. There is so much possibility, and she lets herself reel in the anticipation for a

moment. Tomorrow, she thinks, she will step right foot out the door and go to buy some sheets. She writes a shopping list in her head. She will buy olive oil, spices and tea, jam, and bread, and will search for furniture and a rug to make the flat her home. London will be home, she thinks, though she has not fully convinced herself yet. There is a part of her that is still afraid that after tomorrow, when she looks for a job and works on her art, London will become another city on a list of places where she doesn't belong.

Though she lies in bed for hours, she cannot sleep, so she rises and pulls on a jacket before stepping into the London night and walking until the sun rises and she is tired enough to sleep. The walking becomes a nightly routine—when she can't sleep at 3 a.m., she pulls on clothes and bares the night. You can't see stars in London, and she wonders how long it would take to get somewhere where you can.

The pub is called 'The Drunken Bard.' It is 11 a.m., and stragglers fill the booths, pint glasses in hand. There is an eerie quietness to the place, as if she shouldn't be seeing it in the daylight like this, but the people laughing and talking reminds her that drinking at a pub before noon in England is normal.

There are two people behind the bar—both who look her age. The boy is tall, and is wearing glasses. He has on brown corduroy pants and a white graphic t-shirt, and as she gets closer she notices the hop in his step—he moves around behind the bar like a natural. The girl is on the far side of the pub, pouring a pint for a customer. She has extremely curly chestnut coloured hair, which is thrown up into a bun. A pen is nestled behind the girl's ear and she stands nonchalantly, as if bored. She wears a button up shirt open over a long black dress.

She doesn't know what to say when she gets to the bar, standing awkwardly and looking in the boy's direction. He looks like the nicer of the two. A patron leaves the bar with three pints balanced in his hands and walks to a booth across the room, and the boy turns to her.

She is startled by the unusual almond color of his eyes as he asks, “What can I get for you?” He is the most British sounding person she’s ever met, his voice formal, clear, and brisk. He sounds less friendly than he looks, though a smile still fills his face.

“Oh, actually I’m here about the job posting?” she says. She had seen the sign outside the window last night as she passed the pub on her walk, and figured that waiting around for another job was self-sabotaging. Her savings could only last her so long, and now that she was settled in she found herself with little to do. She continues, “Now that I’m thinking about it, actually, can I get a Brixton lager?”

He nods and starts talking as he pours it from the nearest tap, “Why do you want to work here?”

She is so shocked by his informality that she responds bluntly, “I need a job?”

He slides the pint in front of her and says, “What’s your availability?”

“I’m free anytime, really,” she says, adding, “just moved here. How much?” she pulls a few pound notes from her pocket. He shakes his head, “Consider it a welcome to the team pint.”

Her eyes go wide with shock, “I’m hired? Just like that?”

“You need a job, are free, and you like beer? Seems as good an employee as any.”

She laughs, “Thanks, then. I don’t even know your name” That was not nearly as stressful as she thought it would be, though she still wonders why it was so simple.

“I’m Simon,” the boy says, drying his hand on his trousers before reaching out his hand, “I’m the manager here.”

“I’m Sullivan—Sully,” she says and shakes his outstretched hand.

“Hey Frank!” he calls to the other girl, who is no longer serving anyone but leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. “Come over here and meet our newest employee.”

The girl walks over. As she gets closer, Sully can see the girl’s high cheekbones and well-defined jawline. She is taller than Sully and doesn’t smile as she reaches Simon.

“Frankie, this is Sullivan!” Simon says enthusiastically, though Frankie does not seem as nearly excited to meet her.

“Hi,” Sully says with a small wave.

“Hey,” Frankie says back, dipping her head before walking away once again.

“You get used to her,” Simon says, laughing softly, “Especially since we’ll all be spending so much time together.”

She nods. Simon pours himself a pint and walks around the bar, motioning for her to follow him.

They head to an empty booth and he hands her a notecard. “Can you just write your full name, email, and phone number? I’ll forward you all the paperwork and stuff later today.”

She follows his instructions and hands him back the card. He places it in his back pocket and pulls out another card—this one with his own name and phone number written under the pub’s name and address. “In case you have any questions,” he says and they shake hands again before she finishes her pint and heads for the door, business card gripped tightly in her hand.

Three weeks later, she stands under the pub’s overhang and waits for the bus. The rain violently darts down, and there is a faint sound of music in every drop, which rustles through the air and shushes the streets of London. Pulling her jacket more tightly around herself, she finishes her pint and runs to the approaching bus. Her hair and jacket are soaked when she sits down, and as she closes her eyes she thinks about how strange it is to be sitting on the bus like this, heading back to her flat from her job. She thinks about what it means to be going home, and wonders if she is going home now—if this foreign place has become home to her so suddenly. She pulls a paperback from her bag and reads most of the trip, eyes drifting off occasionally so that she has to reread the page she was on.

When she gets off the bus, she accepts the rain—though it is slowing—and walks to her flat. She lets herself in and walks up four flights of stairs, slides her key into the lock and opens her door. She locks it behind her, kicks off her shoes, and wanders to her bed—tired, for the first time in a long time. She feels like she is already dreaming as peels off her clothes and crawls under the covers of her queen bed, the magenta duvet enveloping her like a cloud. She doesn’t know if she will sleep, or if she can sleep, but she rests her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then she takes another.

She is restless most of the night, and it is with familiarity that at 3 a.m. she pulls on her jacket and shoes, though she grabs a scarf as well—there is a chill in the air even now, in September. As she walks,

she learns from the city. She often spots foxes darting across streets, or people making their way home, at last, after a long night out and a long tube home. She finds herself impressed at the ability of women to walk in heels on the cobblestone.

Most nights the streets are quiet. She builds landmarks in her mind—the parks and pubs it takes to get to the river and back. She feels the fall settle in the air, and sees it in the trees. She learns the sound of the rain in London, and gets used to the heaviness in the air. She falls into a routine at the pub, working in the day and walking in the night. And as she walks, she starts feeling accepted by this city, and that, she thinks, is a start.

She walks down the street now, on the last day of September, and London takes shape before her eyes. She can't tell if minutes or hours pass and she is walking still, thinking about how particular buildings in London look. Brown, gray, and white, lined down a street with little gated gardens in front. She feels like she is in an episode of *Doctor Who*, and wonders where she would go first if presented with all of time and space. She doesn't want to be anywhere but here, which surprises her, and she soaks up the crispness of the night air and thinks about morning, wondering when it will come. The chill in the morning is different than it is in the night, past even witching hour now, which in this moment startles her awake, over and over. She is walking north towards the river as Big Ben strikes four, and she hears it despite the distance, becoming suddenly aware of the stillness beneath the lamp posts, and the calmness in the air.

“Sully?” she hears a voice say. She startles, but there's something familiar in the tone so she stays where she is. Her immediate thought is who could possibly be out right now, though she also wonders who could be out right now who *knows her name*. She can't place his accent, which sounds both American and English.

She looks at him, approaching cautiously and curiously with a look of astonishment on his face. Even though his voice is different, and he is more than a decade older than the last time she saw him, Sully knows the man who stands before her almost an instant after she sees him, "Max."

He's at a loss for words. "How are you....here?" he says, as if he's trying to come to terms with it himself, "How are you?"

She doesn't know how to respond. How is she? She does not yet feel renewed in this new place, but she has tried to fully run away from who she was. Is it even possible to run away from a version of yourself? Is she running away from the words the people used to describe her back home? Mischievous, rebellious, shrewish, messy. Is she running away from who she no longer wants to be? Is she looking for a place where she isn't as much of a mess as she is?

"I don't know," she says honestly. "How are you? How did you know it was me?"

He ignores her first question, saying, "Your hair, first. It almost glows in the moonlight," he says and she notices his eyes as he looks at her hair. It's as if he has seen a ghost. "Then I saw your face. You look exactly the same."

"That's what you want to hear," she jokes.

"It's comforting," he says, and she raises her eyebrows at him. "I mean, just that you're definitely you. How else could I have spotted you like this," he continues, gesturing to the dark and empty street.

She nods. He seems as uncomfortable as she feels, though she fights the urge to show it. "I'm not upset, Max." She laughs to break the awkward silence and he relaxes. When she looks at him now, messy light brown hair and a smile on his face, she wonders how he also looks exactly the same as he did fifteen years ago. How is his smile the exact same?

Sullivan Hunt and Maxwell Gardner met on the first day of kindergarten. She was supposed to be napping at the time, but had snuck a book back behind the cubbies and was reading instead, wide awake. She was upright, back to the wall, hidden from her teacher, who had already yelled at her once for not following instructions.

“Hi,” she heard a voice say, and a boy appeared over the top of her book—his hair was the first thing she noticed and his smile was the second. She watched him for a second, analyzing the curly hair that sprung from his head, blonde but almost brown, and the toothy smile that filled his face. She did not smile back, and instead scowled at him and looked back to her book.

“What do you want?” she asked him, not looking up.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” he asked. “You’re going to get in trouble.”

“I don’t care if I get in trouble,” she said, and it was the truth. “She can’t tell me to nap if I don’t want to.”

The boy sat, ignoring Sully’s obvious indifference. “I saw you earlier, on the playground,” he said. A rumble grew in her chest as she set her book down and looked at him. He was still smiling, and a foot away from her, leaning against the shelf of square cubbies. “Why didn’t you play outside? You were reading all alone, it was so sad.” He grabbed the book out of her lap and said, “What are you reading?”

She snatched it back, “None of your business.”

She watched as his smile dropped, but was surprised at how fast it replastered on his face as he asked, “Do you like reading?”

“Obviously,” she whispered, rolling her eyes, “Can you please be quieter, also? You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“I also like to read,” he said, trying to whisper, though he obviously struggled to keep his voice down. “My favorite is Roald Dahl.”

She huffs. “He’s cool I guess.” She picked up her book again and started to read.

“He’s awesome. Don’t you wish you could catch dreams like the BFG? The other giants are kind of scary, but he’s so cool. I wish I could try frobscottle and whizzpoppers, don’t you?”

She didn’t have time to answer him—to tell him that she actually did love the BFG but because she saw herself in Sophie, not because of Dream Country or the frobscottle and whizzpoppers—because suddenly he gasped and she looked up to find the cubby slowly tipping over. She watched in terror as the

cubby tipped and hit the ground with a boom. On the other side, their teacher stood with her hands on her hips, scowling at them. She glared at Max, and thus a great friendship emerged.

She was never good at making friends—is still not good at it—but she had him. He was her only friend back then—her best friend and her first friend. She had been born to a family that didn’t really want her—her parents were aloof and uncaring, and cared more about their jobs than they ever cared about their child. Her mother is a journalist and her father is a lawyer. They hadn’t wanted kids, as it turned out, even after they had a kid. She spent most of her time with a babysitter until she was old enough to care for herself. At eight, she knew how to cook herself a meal and do her laundry. She cleaned and dried her dishes immediately after eating, so she could put them away before her parents got home, as to not make a mark on their lives.

It was up to them to care, and they never did. She spent most of her time with Max, for years the only person who she felt like knew her. They would talk for hours each day, walking the neighborhoods that connected them; sitting on his porch swing; sneaking onto rooftops with tupperware containers of his family’s leftovers. They had talked about everything, it seemed, and he became a sort of lighthouse for her—in the distance, but clear as day. It was around him that she could be herself. The summer they were both eleven, his parents moved them to England to be with his mother’s family. Their classmates whispered about if he’d come back with a British accent or whether he’d come back at all.

After he left, she became a social recluse. Loneliness was better than the alternative. She kept to herself most of the time, reading and painting. Always painting, even now. Early on, people tried to make fun of her for being alone, but slowly people learned not to get involved with her at all. She would only lash out and pick a fight rather than being made fun of. She was not worth the effort for others, though she had a reputation and a fierceness that people didn’t expect. Her parents put her in therapy, calling them ‘anger issues,’ but she couldn’t fight the feeling that the anger wasn’t the problem.

She was so angry, even then. She had come out of the womb angry, her parents had always said, bitter that she was angry at *them*. She was not angry now, had felt it suddenly dissolve upon seeing Max.

“It’s funny,” he said, “that first time we met, we were supposed to be asleep,” he said, a chuckle behind his eyes, “And look at us again, in London, in the middle of the night.”

“We’re supposed to be asleep all over again,” she said, and it felt like they were meeting that first day after all, and she was glad for once that she couldn’t sleep.

“I don’t know where to start with my questions,” he said.

Though she hasn’t felt happy for a while, she can’t fight a smile at his unserious tone, as if they were in elementary school again. “Nearly fifteen years of material to cover,” she said.

“What are you doing up and wandering the streets at four in the morning?”

“That’s the question you start with?” she asks, eyes widening and jaw dropping.

“It’s why we’re both here, isn’t it?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

“Yes, but you have to answer first,” he says, and she catches amusement in his eyes

“Charles Dickens famously took walks at night. I just moved here and figured I’d try it out.” She was not going there with him, not telling him about the years of sleepless nights, or the walks that came with them. “Why are you up and out?” she says before he can ask more.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Just was up and had a feeling I should take a walk.”

“You just had a feeling and decided to roam the streets of London?”

“Yeah,” he says confidently before retreating a bit and saying a bit quieter, “And my gut was right, because here you are.”

“Here I am.”

They look at each other for a moment, as if they are both unsure if they are dreaming or if they are really both in South London in the witching hour of September, fifteen years after he left.

“Can we keep walking?” he asks, and she is startled at how calm fills her head and body at the sound of his *we*.

She nods. They start to walk, going no particular direction other than forward.

“Have you been in London all this time?” she asks

He shakes his head, “When we first came here, all those years ago, we moved up North. I’ve only been here a couple of years.”

She laughs, “I’ve only been here a couple of weeks. Just under a month, I guess.”

He laughs, and then they both can’t stop laughing because they feel three thousand miles and fifteen years away. When they compose themselves, she looks at him and smiles in acknowledgment that yes, this is crazy, but also yes, she is glad.

“Why did you move here?” she asks him, wanting to know more about a person for the first time in years, maybe her whole life since he was her friend.

“Work,” he says, “I work in an architecture firm in Holborn. My parents are still up North—I don’t think my dad will ever leave the English countryside. I was in Scotland for Uni.”

“Wow,” she says, because there is nothing else to say. So many places she has not been, has not wanted to go until now. “I just came here because I needed something new. I quit my job and applied for a visa. I got a flat and got a job in a pub. I don’t really know what I’m doing, though,” she says. He watches her. “A new start, I guess.”

“If I remember correctly, even as a kid you didn’t do things without thinking.”

She nods, “Adult me doesn’t do things without thinking. This is a first for me. But like I said, I needed a new start.” Truthfully, she needed a place where people didn’t know who she was, or how reckless and messy she was. Max didn’t know that girl either, not really, anyways. He only knew the angry child who was bad at making friends. The girl before her, or the girl who made her. She realized now, as he smiled at her, uncaring to who she was or who she could be, that this is where she decides to let go of it all. It’s the moment of truth.

“Are you living around here?” he asks.

She nods, “Just west of Peckham Rye Park. You?”

“I live in Brixton.” He laughs again, triggering a smile to spread across her face.

They’re thinking the same thing but she says, “How are we both here?”

“It’s fucking wild. Sullivan Hunt, before my very eyes.”

“Maxwell Gardner.” She says his name slowly, digesting the fact that her first, and only true friend, is living here, in the city she had just moved to. The city she didn’t plan on leaving anytime soon. She was going to stick this one out, if she was capable of sticking out anything. They walk and talk until the sky starts to lighten. She finds it as easy to talk to him now as she did back then, which makes her smile. She can’t believe this is real, so she turns to look at him again, the morning light moment by moment revealing his face to be as real as can be to her.

“I think I have to go to bed,” he says, “but I’m afraid you’ll disappear forever if you leave my sight.”

“I’m not a dream, Max,” she laughs, “I promise I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“What about the day after that?”

“Then too.”

He nods as they turn and she follows him to the bus stop. They exchange phone numbers and agree that he’ll come meet her at a cafe near her tomorrow, hugging as they spot the bus rounding the corner. She melts into his touch, at the familiarity. She realizes she doesn’t know him anymore, but is startled at the fact that she *wants* to. She gets home and sleeps for the first time in days.

They meet at a cafe on Howden Street the next afternoon, but she feels awkward with him in the daylight. They sip their coffee, and she can tell he is trying to make sense of her being here by the way he looks at her, as if she were some apparition.

“Do you want to talk about why you were up last night, or should I say this morning?” he asks, breaking the silence.

“I haven’t slept well for months. Years, really,” she says. She doesn’t know why she keeps talking, but his eyes don’t leave hers and he smiles encouragingly. “Ever since I got here, I’ve been walking at

night. By the time I get home in the morning, I'm tired enough to sleep. At least for a little while. Last night, after seeing you, was the first time I slept well in months."

"Me too," he says. She nods. "How long are you here for?"

She shrugs. "Until I don't want to be here anymore."

"Fair enough," he says, bobbing his head.

"How long are you here for?" she asks.

"Until I don't want to be here anymore." He looks down and swirls the coffee around in his mug before he says "I don't think I could ever willingly leave my job, though. I love it." He smiles, and it's as cheesy as ever.

"What do you love about it?" she asks.

"It's creative but concrete, no pun intended." The pun was *definitely* intended. "You can be as imaginative or as boring as you want. There are rules, but the quality is all up to the individual."

She nods, "That makes sense."

"I like the drawing part of it, too."

"You always liked to draw." She remembers the days they spent in silence on his front porch, her painting and him sketching.

He shrugs, "Never stopped. Do you still paint?"

She nods. "I should've stopped a long time ago—half the time my paintings look so abstract I wonder what I was going for in the first place."

"You aren't a quitter Sully. Never have been."

"You aren't a quitter either, Max," she says, sighing. "But I think you might be wrong about me. I'm different than you remember. There's a lot you don't know about me."

"There's a lot you don't know about me either," Max says, "It's been fifteen years, Sully. We both don't know anything about each other." He laughs.

She barely knew anything about herself, but she doesn't tell him that. Instead, she says, "I'd like to learn, though, about you."

“I’d like to learn about you too.” They finish their coffee in silence, and leave each other once again. She watches him walk away after dropping her off at her building. He looks back once, and she waves, as if to remind him that she isn’t going anywhere.

When she inevitably can’t sleep that night, she thinks about the years that stretch between them and wonders if he will show up again tonight, now that he knows she is here, or if his sleepless night has come and gone. She tosses and turns as she waits, and an anxiety grows in her chest as her heart beats faster and impossibly faster. When it is 3 a.m. and she can barely swallow, let alone breathe, she gives up and pulls on clothes and shoes to repeat last night’s path. She sees him before he sees her. He is sitting at the corner of the park, on a bench, exactly where they had run into each other the night before. She wonders if he kept himself awake for this, or if all of his nights are sleepless like hers. He is wearing jeans, an emerald green sweater, and a black fisherman beanie, and despite the hour, she feels underdressed.

He turns towards her, as if he can sense her coming, and raises his hand in a wave. He smiles at her and she smiles back, keeping her pace steady instead of speeding up, resisting the break in her control like her gut wants.

“You came,” she says as she reaches him.

“Of course I came.”

“You say it like it’s obvious,” she says, sitting next to him on the bench. “I figured you might be here, and I was right, but we didn’t talk about it. I didn’t know if last night was just a fluke for you. That could’ve been the first sleepless night you’ve ever had.”

He laughs, “That is far from the first night, and it definitely won’t be the last. I thought we agreed earlier that we both hadn’t slept well in months.”

It had gone over her head earlier, but she thinks now about the bags under Max’s eyes and the tired way his body hung as they walked, like it was too heavy for him to bear anymore. “We talked about why I can’t sleep, but why can’t you sleep?” she asks, though she is afraid of the answer. Anything that can stop Max from his rampant cheeriness is scary enough to her.

“Just been a rough couple of months,” he says. “I never had this problem before.” She is left wondering—before what? But before she can ask, he stands up, motioning for her to join him, and changing the subject, “It’s fun seeing London at night like this. I think the only other time I’ve been out at 3 a.m. is walking home from a night out, and I definitely wasn’t appreciating the peacefulness then.”

They walk together again, aimlessly, through the streets of London. A clock’s strike hums throughout the night. It is the end of September, and it is almost morning. Their walks become a routine. They meet each night and walk, though neither of them brings up why they both still can’t sleep. They talk about almost everything and try to shorten the missing years between them. He talks about his family; parents settled in the countryside and younger brother at University up North; his time in Scotland; his architecture degree and his favorite buildings to draw in London—One Blackfriars is his favorite because of the way the sunset reflects in its windows; the highlands and Glencoe; how he believes in the Loch Ness Monster now.

“You sound like a flat earther, Max. You don’t really believe in it do you?” Sully asks him that night. “I do! There’s all this proof that there’s at least something that lives down there. Have you ever seen the sonar?” he says defensively, “When I went on a tour of Loch Ness they showed us all this crazy stuff. Who knows what could be out there.”

She shakes her head and smiles, holding in a laugh. “I wish I believed in things half as much as you do.”

“The only thing stopping you is you,” he says, shrugging.

As days turn into weeks, she talks about working at the pub—though refuses to tell him any of the details about where she’s working in fear he’d show up unexpectedly—college, the girl that lived down the hall who became her friend and then drifted away; friendless years, her ever-changing job prospects, her love-hate relationship with oil paint, and the time she got so angry and impatient that she punched a hole in the middle of her canvas, her subsequent switch to acrylic paint and the books she’s read. “I’ve read a lot,” she says one night in October. “I feel like time has escaped me,” she says. She laughs, “I don’t

even know what I've done since you left other than read, and I was only ten then, so surely something must have happened since."

"I know what you mean," he sighs.

"Is your favorite book still *The BFG*?" she asks, though she immediately feels silly because there's no way it is, after all this time.

He pauses and cracks a smile, eyeing her mischievously. "You remember."

"Nothing quite like England to remind me of *The BFG*. He dines with the queen!"

He laughs, "He does dine with the queen."

"You didn't answer the question," she says, and this time it's her time to eye him playfully.

"It is," he says, "Though I do have some other favorites on the list now."

"Like what?"

"I'm too exhausted to remember."

"Bring one sometime?"

"As long as you actually return it," he says, "because if I remember correctly you lost not one but three of my books that I lent to you."

"Hey! That was nearly twenty years ago," she says, crossing her arms, "You aren't allowed to hold a grudge."

"I feel like a slight grudge should be allowed."

"I didn't think you were even capable of holding grudges," she says, eyebrows raising in surprise.

"I'm not, really. But totally hypothetical fake grudges about books I lent you in elementary school are allowed."

"I'll allow it," she says.

She thinks about whether she feels any grudge against Max and is surprised when she realizes she doesn't. A question that she's pretty sure they both have been ignoring blooms in her mind, and she quickly blurts it out before she can convince herself not to say anything. "Why did you never try to find me?"

He doesn't point out that she also didn't try to find him, instead thinking for a moment. "I did try, once. But as it turns out, your internet presence is practically Victorian. I don't know why I never tried anything else. After I first left I brought it up to my parents, but they had no clue how to reach you. We always just hung out, I don't think I ever called your home phone."

She watches him as he speaks, and thinks about wasted time. "I begged my parents once," she says. "To help me. They had to have some sort of way to contact your parents, but they said they didn't. They warned me what would happen if I asked about it again, so I didn't."

"I should have found you," Max says, and swallows a lump in his throat. "I'm sorry I left you there with them."

"It isn't your fault."

"I was supposed to be your best friend."

"You *are* my best friend, Max," she says, "Sometimes I feel like, after all these years, that's the one thing that hasn't changed."

They talk through the night until the sky lightens and they part, just like every other night since they met. And every morning, when she returns to her flat, she buries herself under covers and falls asleep, dreaming of Big Ben as it rings; of Max, then and now; the smell of cigarettes that always permeates the edges of her dreams; the chill of London in mornings to come; the lights they've hung up in the pub; and a clock chiming now like winter bells in the distance.